

First Long Distance Traders Never Reach Agreement

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MERTZON, Texas — Out here in the short grass country, one often hears the expression, “a West Texas trade.” The term refers to our habit of making a deal over the telephone, with no more involved than two men binding themselves by giving their word that such-and-such will be delivered at a certain date for a certain price, i.e. a thousand or so lambs, a car or two of calves, or a section or so of land.

This type of dealing did not originate in this part of the country, however. It was founded many years ago in the Everglades of Florida when a little-known incident launched the custom even though the two traders involved never consummated any business.

To understand what took place, it is necessary to consider the background of one of the participants, a talented Creek Indian name Long Stick.

Long Stick was something special in the way of Indians, a real standout who gained his name as a child from his habit of always using a longer hockey stick than his playmates. He was also known, at an early age, for his uncanny ability to win bets that his team would win the game.

As a matter of fact, Long Stick grew so astute at games and gambling that he is credited with being the father of the six-to-five proposition that remains popular even to this day.

Along with relieving his fellow tribesmen of their wampum, Long Stick did lots of eavesdropping whenever the elders of the tribe met to chew the fat about the old days when the Creeks were operating 84,000 sections of land, or the good times back there when the Creeks still thought the Paleface was sent by the Great Spirit.

Long Stick would take careful notes of these tales and then think about how the whites were putting the old hocus-pocus to the Indian. He grew so serious about the matter that he hardly noticed that the daughter of Old Big Slipper, a doe-eyed maiden named Collapsed Quiver, was hotter than a wigwam full of melted bear tallow to marry him.

If Collapsed Quiver hadn't been a pretty special dish herself, Long Stick might have overlooked her altogether, considering the chousing that a fellow named Andrew Jackson was giving the Creeks and other Indians about that time.

But, distracted as he was, Long Stick took off enough time to get married and would have made a love nest if the rumor hadn't hit the Creek Nation that Andrew Jackson was doing all the fighting just to gain entry to the big white house on the Potomac River.

When this news finally seeped down to Long Stick, he told his new bride to start packing. Then, after the usual red tape, he arranged for a chance to talk before the great council.

His speech brought down the house. He told the wise men that if they stayed around to see the last card played in this game he would bet them six to five that old Andrew Jackson would march them off so far away from the homeland that the fastest runner in the tribe couldn't make it back in two weeks.

Oh, how the councilmen laughed. They howled until tears came to their eyes. (Later, at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, the same wise men shed some more tears, but not because they thought getting the hound whipped out of them by Andrew Jackson was very funny.)

After trying to warn the council, Long Stick resigned from the tribe and took off to the Seminole country down in Florida. And you can bet six to five that Collapsed Quiver never forgot the trip, because Long Stick struck a trot and barely slowed down until he was deep in Spanish territory.

For a long time the two Creek runaways lived in peace with the Seminoles. It was a good life for the most part, even though Collapsed Quiver didn't particularly care for the Seminole custom of eating a casserole dish made of cottonmouth snakes and tree moss.

Well, as you know, it wasn't long until the United States kind of bought Florida from the Spanish. And the ink had hardly dried on the deed before the U.S. started a project to move the Seminoles off their peninsula.

This proved to be a bigger task than our country had bargained for. The Seminoles were exceedingly tough and in no humor to move from the Everglades to some Utopia such as a desert in Oklahoma and Texas.

For two years they scrapped. Then one day a new colonel was shipped from Washington to make peace.

By this time, Long Stick was a respected big daddy among the Seminoles. He could also speak excellent English.

Although no one recorded the exact words between the colonel and Long Stick, this is close to what happened at the first historic use of a new medium of communication to negotiate a trade:

The colonel rode up to the Everglades where he suspected Long Stick & Co. were camping. In a loud voice, through a megaphone, he shouted this message: "Oh noble, brave brother-under-the-skin, we come to smoke the pipe of peace. Do you hear me, dear red brother? Peace. P-E-A-C-E!"

Long Stick answered through a tanned alligator's tail which he had fashioned into his own idea of a sound amplifier: "Yes, honorable disciple of the teachings of Jefferson and Madison, I hear. But, dear follower of the justice of John Marshall, hearing ain't exactly the same as believing."

This dumbfounded the colonel for a moment. Then, regaining his composure, he returned to the megaphone and said; "Oh noble red man, I come in peace and want only nine million acres of your land and a few dozen young Indian maids to do the chores about our camp. I will pay for this. Yes, PAY! For the Great White Father, A. Jackson, has commissioned me to give you a bushel basket full of solid brass buttons and a round trip ticket to see the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia."

At this point the colonel thought the service had broken down because there was a long silence. Then Long Stick answered as follows:

"Your terms are quite generous, my brother-under-the-skin. But for the time being, let's put it this way: I'll call you later, much later than the moon that rises in the winter or the long days of much sun. Be patient, dear white man. I will let you know when the Seminoles will make peace.

The colonel sat around the edge of the Everglades until the brass buttons were rusty and the two passes to see the Liberty Bell had expired. It's hard to say what Long Stick was up to, since he had moved to the darkest place in the Everglades. Some historians think he was probably teaching the Seminoles how to play his version of the shell game.

Thus, the first attempt to trade by long distance went sour. It is my understanding that Long Stick and the colonel never established contact. But they did open the path to a method of doing business that was quickly adopted when Alexander Graham Bell refused to let well enough alone and just had to invent the telephone.